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ABSTRACT

Teachers in the school setting need to emphasize quality handwriting across the curriculum. Quality handwriting means that the written content is easy to read in either manuscript or cursive form. Handwriting achievement can be assessed, but not compared to the precision of assessing basic addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division facts. Handwriting achievement can be assessed in degrees from being legible to being illegible. Thus, a rubric, carefully developed and designed, can be used to ascertain the quality of handwriting achievement. This paper first provides a brief history of handwriting instruction and then presents the author's personal history of learning handwriting skills in elementary school in Kansas. It also discusses handwriting instruction during the author's parents' school years. The paper outlines 10 criteria that need to be followed by the teacher in teaching/learning situations in handwriting. It also cites these items to notice in improving handwriting quality: (1) how much progress does the student show over previous performance in handwriting; (2) how well is the student monitoring his/her handwriting quality; (3) how much effort does the student show in desiring to improve handwriting skills; (4) how much writing does the student do in functional situations so that others may read what has been written; and (5) how much conscientious practice is the learner putting into improving individual letter formation, staying on the line when writing, etc. (Contains several handwriting illustrations and 6 references.) (NKA)

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Assessing Handwriting Achievement.

by Marlow Ediger

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M. Ediger

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ASSESSING HANDWRITING ACHIEVEMENT

How important is good handwriting? It is very important. In a recent newscast, medical doctors were advised to take a course in handwriting due to prescriptions written illegibly for pharmacists to read. If incorrect prescription drugs are taken or given to individuals, the results could be quite negative. In addition to medical doctors, individuals do write messages to themselves as well as to others. Generally, the reader can decipher his/her own messages, but not always. University students sometimes have said they cannot read their own handwriting in notes taken in class. Or, an individual says that he/she cannot determine what was to be bought from a shopping list taken to the supermarket. The author has received friendly letters which were impossible to read due to poor quality handwriting. Thus, students do need to develop legible handwriting to communicate with others and with the self. Even if word processors became small enough to carry in one's hip pocket, the chances are not all will have this device, nor have it with them when needed. Then too, some things are much easier and quicker to write in long hand than to use a word processor.

Teachers in the school setting need to emphasize quality handwriting across the curriculum. Quality handwriting means that the written content is easy to read in either manuscript or cursive form. There are skeptics of being able to evaluate handwriting progress in precise, measurable terms. They probably believe like Gorgias (483-375) in ancient Athens who as a septic believed that nothing exists; if anything did exist, it could not be known; if, by chance it could be known, it would remain a secret because it could not be communicated (Sahakian, 1968). Handwriting achievement can be assessed but not compared to the precision of assessing basic addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division facts. In the the basic arithmetic facts, answers are either right or wrong. Handwriting achievement can be assessed in degrees from being legible to being illegible. Thus, a rubric, carefully developed and designed, may well be used to ascertain the quality of handwriting achievement.

A Brief History of Handwriting Instruction

Handwriting has its own history in education. John Jenkins wrote the Art of Handwriting in 1791. He helped to standardize what was considered good handwriting. Before his time, there was seemingly anarchy in how letters of the alphabet were to be formed in handwriting. Jenkin's book stressed the mechanical facets of handwriting, but it did serve as a model for practical writing. In 1830, Benjamin Franklin Foster advocated using the motion of the forearm and fingers in handwriting. His book Practical Penmanship stressed the importance of wrist/finger

movement to increase speed in handwriting. Charles Zaner and Austin Palmer came out with handwriting materiels in 1900. They stressed speed and legibility in handwriting. Their names are still important today with Zaner/Blosser and the Palmer methods of teaching handwriting. Objective means of measuring achievement in handwriting were emphasized in 1904 by E. L. Thorndike. He developed a handwriting scale to ascertain student achievement. He also did research to ascertain under which conditions students do best in handwriting such as facing the desk directly and not at an angle. Thorndike's handwriting scales provide a basis for present day rubric development. Generally, there were five levels of handwriting specimens from the poorest to the best. Students as well as the teacher may move the handwriting exhibited by the former to the proper models shown on Thorndike's scale to indicate present level of achievement. Marjorie Walker wrote her thesis on manuscript writing at Columbia University. She proposed that manuscript writing be used only. Thus cursive handwriting was to be eliminated. Both manuscript and cursive handwriting are emphasized presently for students to acquire in the language arts (Tiedt, 1983).

In the early 1800s, Joseph Lancaster brought the Monitorial System of Instruction to the United States. As many as 1000 elementary school age boys were taught in a single room. What was taught in reading selected words was also stressed in handwriting/spelling. This system of schooling emphasized "affordability' for students to attend. Cutting costs was a major goal then in teaching many students inexpensively. Slates were used for writing as well as students writing in sand (See Ediger, 1976, Chapter One).

While attending the elementary school years, 1934-1942, the author experienced, on each grade level, fifteen minutes of handwriting instruction per day. Among other skills in handwriting, he was taught to make ovals in an elliptical form whereby there was no overlapping for these sequential ovals on each line. Each student was to stay on the line and show the proper height for the sequential ovals written. Also, push and pull exercises were stressed. Again, the teacher assessed each line of push and pull in terms of the following:

1. did they reach from the bottom to the top of the line?
2. did they overlap? There was to be no overlapping.
3. did the push and pull lines have the same slant? These lines were to slant like cursive letters do in writing.

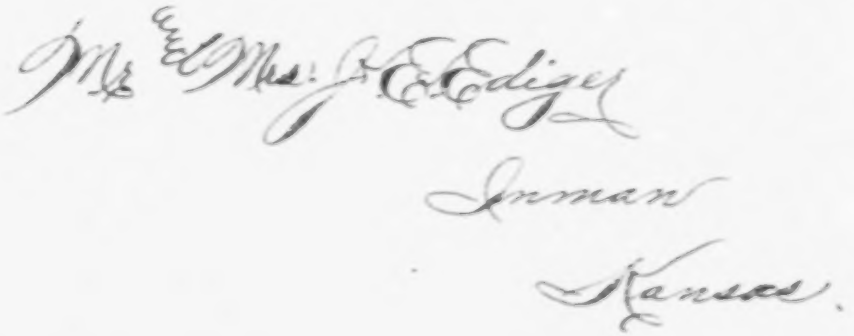
ovals

push and pull

To truly assess handwriting quality, using Zaner-Blosser as a model, the apex of achievement was to win first, second, or third prize, from all students' samples, in Mc Pherson County, Kansas during the school years 1934-1942. My sister, Mildred Ediger, won a certificate for two years sequentially while competing from Turkey Creek School, Mc Pherson County, Kansas. The author did not win a certificate in handwriting, but won certificates in spelling competition for being first and second during two school years in the annual event from McPherson County, Kansas. These awards, handwriting and spelling, indicated two curriculum areas which were highly prized in the public schools during the 1930s and the 1940s.

Then too, grades were given every four weeks on the monthly report card sent to parents. The grades given were an attempt to measure achievement in handwriting using A, B, C, D, and F grades. F grades were given to students. The author well remembers comparing grades among students and saw several F grades in the prestigious area of handwriting! The author and his wife recently completed an Ediger Family History with snapshots and other documents, including diary entries when his grandfather and great grandfather left the Molotschna Colonies in the Ukraine in 1874 to seek a new life in the United States.The diary entries were originally written in German, but have been typed and translated into English by an unknown person around the year 1900.

Here is a sample of my father's (1890-1966) handwriting. The handwriting exhibited here is truly artistic from the year 1920:



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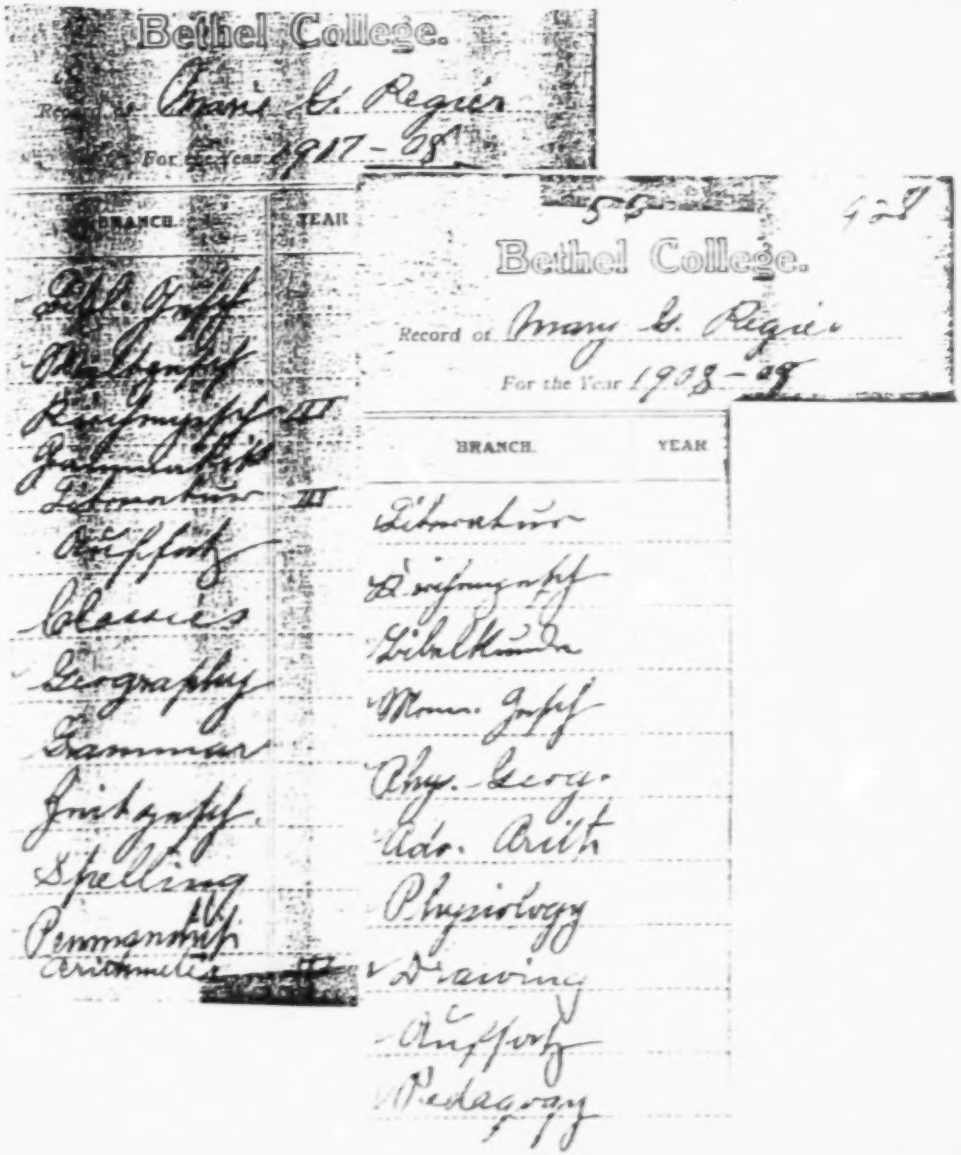
Much emphasis was placed upon the thickness of parts of the individual letter of the alphabet being written as well as imitating correct form, during my late father's elementary school years, 1896- 1904. Students then were presented the correct model by the teacher, followed by much drill and practice. During those years, typewriter use and access was very limited in a rural area. No doubt, highly legible handwriting was very useful and prized highly due to rather crude pen points which were attached to a pen holder. It must have taken excellent eye/hand control to write in an artistic manner.

My late mother (1888-1961) attended Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas during the 1907-1909 academic years. Her transcript, below, had all grades given (these are deleted) and courses listed in longhand. Some of the courses are listed in the German language:



Bethel College.

Record of Mary E. Regier

For the Year 1907-08

BRANCH.	YEAR
Bibl. Gesch.	
Bibelkunde	
Rechtschreib.	III
Sprachlehre	
Literatur	III
Aufsatz	
Classics	
Geography	
Grammar	
Arithmetic	
Spelling	
Penmanship	IV
Arithmetic	III

Bethel College.

Record of Mary E. Regier

For the Year 1908-09

BRANCH.	YEAR
Literatur	
Rechtschreib.	
Bibelkunde	
Wissenschaft	
Phy. Geog.	
Adv. Arith.	
Physiology	
Drawing	
Aufsatz	
Pedagogy	

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Handwriting for the 1907-1909 school years reveals the following qualities, above, of the unknown secretary to the Registrar:

1. the handwriting is legible, but not artistic.
2. the letter "M" on Mary G. Regier (maiden name) contains some illegibility, but might have been commonly written this way in the easily 1900s.
3. each letter is written with uniform thickness.
4. the transcript was not written necessarily to show quality handwriting. However, in those years good handwriting was valued extremely highly.
5. the kind of handwriting exhibited by the Registrar's Office was used for communication purposes only, not to reveal an artistic model.

Some generalizations pertaining to assessing handwriting instruction from the early 1900s to the present indicate the following trends:

1. handwriting quality presently pertains to communicating to others in a readable fashion; perhaps, legibility has not remained consistent with a lack of separate time given to handwriting instruction.
2. highly legible handwriting is not prized as highly presently as compared to the 1930s and up to the 1960s. However, with the continued availability of word processors, the needs are seen as less important to spend a considerable amount of time in handwriting instruction.
3. handwriting instruction can take up much time in classroom instruction sessions. This time may be more wisely used for a changing curriculum. However, handwriting presently revealed should be legible for the reader in order to secure as accurately as possible the messages being conveyed.
4. the quality of handwriting exhibited can be assessed and measured using carefully designed rubric devices.
5. in the past, teacher observation was used to assess and determine the merit of each student's handwriting. Thus, grades given in handwriting differentiated one student's achievement from the others in the classroom. More refined and better means of assessment are available to ascertain achievement in handwriting (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Ten).

Motivating Quality, Legible Handwriting

Teacher strengths in teaching and learning situations in handwriting may be appraised on a Likert five point scale. The following criteria then need to be followed by the teacher in teaching handwriting:

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1. objectives should be challenging and yet attainable by students. The objectives of instruction should be chosen carefully so that each student may communicate effectively in writing.

2. learning opportunities should be valid and align with these objectives. Individual differences need to be provided for so that each may achieve as optimally as possible.

3. interesting experiences and activities should be experienced by students in handwriting. Dull, drill activities should be replaced with learning opportunities which engage students to attain as much as possible in handwriting.

4. purpose in handwriting needs to be experienced by each student. With purpose students perceive reasons for participation to improve in handwriting skills. The teacher may explain purposes for the need to improve handwriting in ongoing lessons and units of study.

5. handwriting is interdisciplinary and should be stressed across the curriculum. Ideas come first in writing. With proof reading what has been written, legible handwriting must be in evidence. Each writer of content will desire to communicate effectively with others; this means that legible handwriting needs to be in the offing.

6. meaningful learning needs to be stressed by the teacher and students. In handwriting, each student should perceive meaning involved in forming upper and lower case letters legibly. If letters in words are not written legibly, then meaningful communication may well be lacking or minimized. Examples of good handwriting whereby meaningful messages are communicated should be compared/contrasted with illegible writing. the latter might then be hard to read whereby time is wasted by the reader in making sense of the written message. Legible content can be read much more quickly and the reader may consider this also to emphasize politeness by the writer. Many have been amazed when reading the handwriting of others how sloppy and carelessly the ideas have been written.

7. diagnosis and remediation of handwriting needs to be emphasized. Diagnosis might well involve the student as writer and analyzer of weaknesses in legibility. Remediation may then follow with correct methods and formations of letters. Proper spacing of letters and words, proper height of each letter, and quality individual letters of the alphabet need to be practiced in a useful way. Neatness is a further consideration to stress in well written content.

8. the teacher needs to serve as a model for quality handwriting when using the overhead, chalkboard, or personal handwritten messages sent to learners. Students do see what the teacher writes and how well the handwriting is done. Students may be referred to the teacher's model when being taught proper formation of letters. All classrooms, too, should have a chart, permanently displayed, containing

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upper and lower cases of letters in manuscript and cursive writing for reference use as needed to write meaningful communication.

9. practice for students, as diagnosed, must be performed in practical situations to communicate quality handwriting to others. Practice in letter formation in a utilitarian situation is quite different from drill and more drill. Some drill may also be necessary as the purpose indicates from illegible student handwriting. But, drill then has a purpose as does practice in handwriting.

10. good attitudes toward handwriting needs to be stressed in ongoing activities. In using a Likert Scale to appraise teaching behavior in terms of the above named behaviors, it is good to assess frequently and involve several raters. Reliability is a key item here in the rating process. Thus, there needs to be major agreements among raters when assessing a teacher in terms of having followed the ten enumerated criteria for quality teaching listed above (Ediger, 1997, Chapter Three).

Rubric Use to Assess Handwriting Quality

Rubrics may be used to assess handwriting progress of learners. Thus, a rubric may be carefully developed by using specimens of handwriting written by peers of a certain grade level. The specimens are arranged from high to low in quality. Students and the teacher may assess each person's handwriting by moving his/her product to the location where it best matches with the quality of the specimen in the rubric. By having both the teacher and the student, the latter monitoring his/her own handwriting, comparisons may be made of the assessments. The teacher may notice how the student appraises the self as compared to his/her assessment of the learner. The goal is to assist students to improve in handwriting legibility.

Items to notice in improving handwriting quality are the following:

1. how much progress does the student show over previous performance in handwriting.
2. how well is the student monitoring his/her handwriting quality.
3. how much effort does the student show in desiring to improve handwriting skills.
4. how much writing the student does in functional situations so that others may read what has been written, including the quality of handwriting.
5. how much conscientious practice the learner is putting into improving individual letter formation, staying on the line while writing, spacing letters and words properly, having proper proportion of letters within words, and slanting letters appropriately for manuscript and cursive writing. Again, the ultimate goal in handwriting is legibility so that readers may be able to read content written readily (Ediger, 1988, Chapter Two).

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